DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 863 CS 212 632

AUTHOR Miller, Richard E.
TITLE Dangerous Liaisons: When Film and Literature Meet.
PUB DATE 14 Sep 90
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Responsibilities for Literacy Conference (Pittsburgh, PA, September 14-15, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Environment; Critical Viewing; *Films; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Literature Appreciation; Popular Culture; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Aesthetic Reading; *Dangerous Liaisons (Film); Discourse Aims; Film Viewing; University of Pittsburgh PA

ABSTRACT

Students in a "Literature and Ideas" introductory literature course at the University of Pittsburgh gathered a wide variety of interviews, articles, and other texts that circulated around the film "Dangerous Liaisons" to build a shared text on the popular reception of the film. One student, in particular, made sense of the work done in class by returning, in his final essay, to a class discussion on the various ways tne film reviewers had "read" the film to problematize a way of reading described as "giving the author power." This student's essay shows that film can be used to bring to the surface the complex literate acts involved in reading both printed and visual texts. In either medium, there will always be gaps, fissures, blank spaces, things left unsaid--discursive spaces for the students to explore and develop. It is the role of teachers to provide an environment that fosters such self-reflexive exploration. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED327863

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard E. Miller
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Richard E. Miller,
Fifth Floor,
Cathedral of Learning,
University of Pittsburgh,
Pittsburgh, PA 15260.
(412)-441-1631.

Responsibilities For Literacy
Panel: Literacy and the Common Culture
Friday, September 14, 1990 1:00-2:30
Pittsburgh Hilton,
Pittsburgh, PA

CS212632

Dangerous Liaisons: When Film and Literature Meet

I would like to begin this paper on what can happen when film is brought into a literature course by speaking briefly about the social and literary critic F.R. Leavis because he plays a curiously dual role in my current thoughts about literacy. In *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, Leavis argues that the film and newspaper industries offer the masses a "passive diversion" that threatens to overwhelm the "active recreation" offered by literature. Films, in fact, pose the greatest danger to "high culture" because:

> [t]hey provide now the major form of recreation in the civilised world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals...(Leavis, 9-10).

Leavis' consignment of the transaction between film and its audience to the realm of "hypnotic receptivity" is a representation that has enjoyed a long and popular history, having since successfully migrated into arguments about the dangers of television, advertising, and popular music. It has also--and this is why I begin with it today--helped to prevent

the exploration of what literacy might mean when applied to film.

While this representation has been used to keep film out of the literature classroom, the material Leavis relies on to construct this representation can actually be called upon to assist in bringing film into the classroom. In developing his argument, Leavis devoted a great deal of time responding to what he had read in the popular press. That he discovered only evidence to substantiate his sense that the "high cultured" values of the minority were losing ground to the "low cultured" values of the masses is a fact that tells us more about his reading practice than it does about the material he read: Leavis simply may not have known how to read the material before him; he was perhaps "illiterate" when confronted by the discursive practices at play in the popular press. I hope to show in what follows that there are other, more fruitful ways of responding to the popular press and the film industry than Leavis imagined, ways that are anything but "passive" or "hypnotic."

Last year, the Literature Committee at the University of Pittsburgh decided to make room for a film on the syllabus of one of its introductory literature courses--a move that certainly would have outraged Leavis. Although the same core reading list was required in all sections of the course Literature and Ideas, the individual instructors for each section were at liberty to select a film that complemented his or her own inflection of the course's emphasis on the ways in which truth is constructed. When it came time to discuss the film in my section, I had two concerns.

Since we had spent the semester examining the relationship between power and literacy, I wanted my students to continue to pursue this relationship in the film I had chosen. Also, since we had used student papers throughout the semester to discuss how their readings of the assigned texts were constructed and contested, I wanted them to imagine their readings of the film as being in dialogue with the readings offered in the popular press and to consider how these various, often conflicting, readings might be fruitfully engaged.

To meet these concerns, over Thanksgiving Break I sent the students to their local libraries in pursuit of the reviews, interviews, articles and other texts that circulated around the film we were to study, *Dangerous Liaisons*, in order to build a shared text on the popular reception of the film. They were to return with an example of either a text that could be said to have been produced by the film or one that contained information they felt would influence their reading of the film if they had access to it--information about French nobility, the French Revolution, or Laclos' novel, for instance. While I expected a fairly limited response to this combined research effort, the students returned with flood of material related to the film. They brought in over twenty different reviews and interviews; they devised charts for depicting the levels of hierarchy of French nobility in the late eighteenth century; one student interviewed his family about their reading of the film; another, unable to find Laclos' novel in translation, nonetheless wrote a

report explaining how the novel had an epistolary form "much like *Pamela*," which we had read earlier in the course. Although I had hoped this assignment would help to widen the context of the film by bringing other voices into the classroom, the sheer volume of the material that my students collected threatened to bury us in the cacophony produced by all that extra context.

In the time that remains, I would like to show you how one of my students, Mike Zorich, made sense of the work we did in class investigating both the film and the material the students had collected. In his final essay, written in response to a retrospective assignment, Mike returned to a class discussion we had had on the various ways the film reviewers had read the film in order to problematize a way of reading that he described as "giving the author power" (Zorich 1). Defining his initial task as demonstrating what makes it possible to read Valmont's death as honorable, Mike argues that Valmont is presented to the viewer in three stages during the film: first as evil, then as a lover, and finally as "an honor driven martyr." As Mike explains it, the transition to "honor driven martyr" takes place as follows:

> This is all portrayed in the scene where Valmont is in [the] duel with Chevalier Danceny. To set the stage we are brought to the scene with an immediate slashing of Danceny's arm thus hinting at Valmont's far superior skills. This is supported by a Valmont rush at Danceny in which Valmont's sword is unraised yet he drives Danceny back as far as he wishes. The reason for this is to make it perfectly clear that this battle even if it were a battle to the death was not a battle which required nor suggested the life be Valmont's. Yet after successive shots of Valmont's sex scene with Tourvel, Valmont decides to thrust himself upon Danceny's sword and end his own life. "Valmont dies an honorable death" as critic David Coward saw it. To make sure the

> audience makes no mistake that Valmont has died for Tourvel he requests that Danceny deliver a love vow to Tourvel before she dies. This is to prove that Valmont did die because he was killing the only one he ever really loved which is what was fulfilling the requirement of an honorable death (Zorich, 6).

In order to produce a reading of the film that supports critic David Coward's assertion that Valmont died an honorable death, Mike must develop his own definition of an honorable death, a task he performs in two stages. Mike begins by establishing Valmont's superiority in the duel in order to emphasize that Valmont chose his own death. Then, using Valmont's flashbacks and dying words as evidence, Mike builds a case for seeing Valmont's decision to die as motivated by his love for Tourvel. In producing the criteria for an honorable death--namely, one voluntarily chosen and motivated by love--, Mike reads along with Coward, bringing to light what makes Coward's reading possible.

If Mike's work with the film ended at this point, one could argue that he is exactly where Leavis predicted he would be, hypnotically conceding authority to both the film and the critics. However, after having elaborated the argument for reading Valmont's death as honorable, Mike comments:

> It is a beautiful story of sin, love and honor. It is a shame it holds less water than a fork when the text is turned on itself. When one reads with not what they are meant to see, but past this to what is hidden, what a wonderful power this evokes in the reader. To turn the story on itself is to question the fact that a man, who has spent his whole life of royalty playing deceitful games...is able to fall in love so easily (Zorich 6-7).

Opposed to a way of reading that he has designated as giving the author power, Mike proceeds to develop a reading where the reader

exercises power. Returning to re-read those moments in the film where he had previously argued that Valmont's character had changed, Mike offers a series of alternative readings that insist Valmont has actually remained evil throughout the film. Everything goes smoothly with this project until he reaches the scene so crucial to his other reading, the one where Valmont drops his sword: if Valmont's choice wasn't motivated by his love for Tourvel, why did he choose to die?

Rather than dodge this question, Mike raises it himself and returns to the scene of the duel in search of a response:

> How then does this theory explain Valmont's death? This is a question that seems unanswerable apart from the love and honor explanation. Valmont was in a war with the marquise and he considered himself too good to lose. He is in love with himself and he is the only one he would die for. His only regret is that to win the war he is no longer able to play his game and enjoy the fruits of his labor, women. This is all very clear when one follows the process of thought going through his head throughout the fight. His first two memories are of women in bed, Tourvel in particular. These memories remind Valmont what he is giving up to win this war, sex with women. These thoughts are chronologically moving and when Valmont closes his eyes to remember for the third time we need not see his thoughts. Followed chronologically he is thinking of when he says, "when will you start writing again?" This reminds him of why he is there in the first place and thus he thrusts himself onto Danceny's sword (Zorich 8-9).

Notice that in order for Mike to "turn the story on itself," he must uncover aspects of the film unseen and therefore unread in the "honorable death" interpretation. In re-viewing Valmont's flashbacks, Mike discovers a blank, a concealed space that confronts the audience when Valmont closes his eyes the final time, an opening that allows Mike to re-vise his previous

reading. Arguing that the order of Valmont's flashbacks is chronological, Mike fills this blank space with Valmont's final scene in bed with Tourvel, an act of reading that simultaneously provides an alternative motive for Valmont's actions and undermines the reading that posits Valmont's death as honorable.

Mike's unravelling of Valmont's "honorable death" does not rest solely on this initially unseen blank, however; Mike continues:

> Why then did [Valmont] tell Danceny to tell Tourvel his pledge to her? This was Valmont's way to make the public see him as a hero and take one last unreturnable blow to the life of the Marquise....[I]n the end not only does his well worded pledge to Tourvel avoid the words "tell her I love her" but also he pulls out the proof against the marquise, her letters to him. Here we find love was not his motive, it was the destruction of the marquise to win the game that he was interested in. (Zorich 9).

By attending to what Valmont doesn't say as well as to what he does say, by looking at what the audience does and doesn't see, Mike destabilizes his initial reading of the film and constructs an alternative reading that has narcissism and revenge, not love and honor, driving Valmont to act as he does to the very end.

If Mike's work at this point seems perilous, if it appears to challenge accepted reading practices at those moments when Mike reads what is not shown and not said in the film, I would argue that producing such perilous writing marks the presence of "the attitude of a curious and critical subject," an attitude that Paulo Freire asserts is "a fundamental point of departure for the literacy process" (Freire, 68). Freire goes on to define

this "critical and curious attitude" as "characterized by one who is always questioning one's own experience, as well as the reasoning behind this experience" and further that it is evident when "the subjects of knowledge...are challenged by the object to be known" (*ibid.*). While Mike is very clearly working to argue one particular reading of the film in his essay, his self-reflexive questioning throughout demonstrates an attitude both "curious" and repeatedly "challenged by the object to be known." In this way, Mike's writing evidences a dialectical way of reading both the film and the popular press that Leavis seems not to have imagined possible. It is this aspect of Mike's writing--namely what it reveals about his understanding of what is entailed in the act of reading--that I find most important as a teacher concerned with promoting literacy.

Mike, himself, moves away from the film at the end of his retrospective essay to address what is to be gained from imagining the reader as having power rather than the author. Mike writes:

> From Gadamer we can understand that the easier it is to accept what is being presented, or situations in which we tend not to question, the harder we should strive to exploit the power we as readers possess. This power of interpretation that the two interpretations of Valmont has exposed needs to be used in all situations in which we are subjected to others thoughts. It acts as a machete in a jungle of rhetorical truths. It has the power to free us from the shackles of bondage produced by the iterators and sustain our free standings in the world. To forfeit this power is to forfeit your freedom of thought and understanding (Zorich, 11).

If Mike seems a little too exuberantly optimistic about the power available to the dialectical reader, we should not let this wash

out what he has to say about what can be achieved when readers of both films and literature are thought of not as, to use Leavis' terms, those who "surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals...," but rather as active participants in the construction of meaning. While his image is of the machete, the reading practice Mike demonstrates in his essay does not chop and hack wildly through the film; to the contrary, Mike exercises his power as a reader to place himself in dialogue with both the film and its viewers, using his writing to construct, negotiate, dismantle, and re-construct divergent ways of reading the film in order to argue the merits of one reading in particular.

My intent in discussing Mike's work in such detail here has been to discuss one of the things that can happen when film is brought into a literature survey course. Written in an environment where students were invited to articulate and challenge the various readings of the film that emerged from the body of material they themselves had collected, Mike's essay shows that film can be used to surface the complex literate acts involved in reading both printed and visual texts. In either medium, there will always be gaps, fissures, blank spaces, things left unsaid--discursive spaces for the students to explore and to develop through that exploration the attitude of critical and curious subjects. Our work as teachers is to provide an environment that fosters such self-reflexive exploration.

Works Cited

Freire, Paulo. "The People Speak Their Word," in Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's *Literary: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadley, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey, 1987.

Leavis, F. R. *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. Cambridge, England: The Minority Press, 1930.

Zorich, Michael S. *Ways of Reading*. Unpublished essay written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Literature and Ideas, 1989.